

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
March 25, 2004

DEFOREST & DOMINGUEZ GAP WETLANDS: PRELIMINARY DESIGN

File No. 04-005
Project Manager: Karen C. Bane

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$400,000 to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works to prepare a preliminary design and conduct environmental review for wetland creation along the Los Angeles River as recommended in the *DeForest Nature Center and Sixth Street Sites Wetland Feasibility Study* and the *Dominguez Gap Wetlands/Recreation Study*.

LOCATION: East side of Los Angeles River, City of Long Beach, Los Angeles County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map

Exhibit 2: February 24, 2000 Staff Recommendation Project Summary

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31000 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed four hundred thousand dollars (\$400,000) to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works (DPW) to prepare the preliminary design and conduct environmental review for the DeForest and Dominguez Gap Wetlands project, subject to the condition that, prior to the disbursement of any funds, the DPW shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program, including scope of work, budget and schedule, and the names of any contractors it intends to use to conduct the project.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and criteria set forth in Chapter 6 of the Public Resources Code (31251-31270) regarding enhancement of coastal resources.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
-

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff is recommending that the Conservancy provide a grant of \$400,000 to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Works (DPW) to prepare a preliminary design and conduct environmental review for wetland creation in the Market Street (also known as DeForest) and Dominguez Gap storm water retention basins along the Los Angeles River. The proposed project is a high priority project on the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project's 2003-2004 Work Plan. Recommendations would be incorporated from the *DeForest Nature Center and Sixth Street Sites Wetland Feasibility Study*, which was completed by the City of Long Beach with a grant from the Coastal Conservancy (Exhibit 2).

Open water, wetland, riparian, and scrub habitats will be planned in a two-mile corridor along the east side of the Los Angeles River. Wetland loss along the Los Angeles River has been staggering, with 51 miles encased in concrete for flood control and urban development to the river edge. Both the Market Street/DeForest and Dominguez Gap basins were identified as potential sites for wetland restoration in *Wetlands of the Los Angeles River Watershed: Profiles and Restoration Opportunities*, a study prepared by the Conservancy in 2000. Recognizing that the highly urbanized landscape prevents restoration or creation of wetlands to the extent they once existed in the watershed, the Conservancy study concluded that providing a representation of the historic distribution of wetlands resources and hydrologic conditions is valuable.

The wetland designs will optimize water quality improvement, to meet Title 22 standards for reuse as irrigation water, in the case of the Market Street/DeForest Basin, and recharge groundwater, in the case of Dominguez Gap.

Public facilities including trails, overlooks, gates, benches, and signage would help meet the need for open space and encourage public access to the coast. Residents from the neighborhoods and schools bordering the basins would gain park space and educational opportunities once the project is built. A bike path along the river levee connects communities to the coast. During one site visit, a woman with children on the bike path commented to staff that she would ride along the river more frequently if green spaces provided interesting views and rest stops.

The proposed project will set the stage for wetland construction by preparing a preliminary design and conducting required environmental review. The preliminary design will include plans, specifications, schedule, and costs for the wetlands and public facilities. Once the designs provide sufficient detail, environmental review will be completed to satisfy requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act.

The DPW owns and operates both basins. DPW's Watershed Division manages many complex design and construction projects involving multiple goals such as flood control, recreational amenities, and habitat creation or protection. The County of Los Angeles Department of Public Works completed the feasibility study for the Dominguez Gap Wetlands Multiuse Project and has adequate staffing and expertise to ensure project completion.

Site Description: The DeForest/Market Street Detention Basin and east basin of the Dominguez Gap Spreading Grounds form a contiguous, two-mile corridor along the east side of the Los Angeles River (Exhibit 1). The corridor averages 300 feet in width. The basins comprising the corridor are owned and operated by the DPW.

The northernmost basin, Market Street Basin, is a detention basin for flood control. The DeForest Nature Center is located at the north end and consists of an extensive area of planted woodland and a nature trail. Water enters the basin from local storm drains and is pumped into the Los Angeles River by the Market Street Pump Plant. The central and southern reaches of the basin are characterized by open and weedy cover with only a small amount of native vegetation.

The Dominguez Gap Basins are operated for storm water retention and as spreading grounds for infiltration. Water enters the East Basin from a diversion from the River and local storm drains. Excess flows can be pumped back into the River by the Dominguez Gap Pump Station, or transferred via siphon to the West Basin for infiltration into the aquifer.

Project History: Both the DeForest/Market Street and Dominguez Gap basins were identified as potential sites for wetland restoration in *Wetlands of the Los Angeles River Watershed: Profiles and Restoration Opportunities*, prepared by the Conservancy in 2000. Staff explored the City of Long Beach's interest in creating wetlands in the DeForest Basin. The Parks, Recreation and Marine Department was interested in the opportunity, as well as the Water Department, which wanted to harness the wetlands to treat water for reuse. In February 2000, the Conservancy authorized a \$300,000 grant for the City of Long Beach to conduct a feasibility study (Exhibit 2). Completed in summer 2002, it demonstrated that treatment wetlands, trails, and new public-use facilities to support passive recreational and educational activities could be developed.

Independently, in February 2001 the DPW completed a feasibility study for the Dominguez Gap Spreading Grounds and concluded that the Spreading Grounds could be modified to allow a continuous flow of water to create year-round aquatic habitat for native wetland and riparian plant species. Complementary enhancement of existing trails and access points, as well as construction of new public-use facilities to support recreational activities such as bird watching, nature study, hiking, cycling, horseback riding, and environmental education activities could also be included.

Since the City of Long Beach and the DPW were ready to conduct design and environmental review for preferred alternatives from their feasibility studies, they agreed to proceed jointly with the next phase. Joint design will ensure that the habitat, recreational elements, and infrastructure are complementary across the neighboring basins. The work is intended to benefit from economy of scale as well. Since DPW owns both basins, it will be the administrative lead agency for the project. The City will participate with DPW in selecting consultants and reviewing designs.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$400,000
Los Angeles County Department of Public Works	250,000
Rivers and Mountains Conservancy	<u>200,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$850,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is an appropriation to the Conservancy from the California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks, and Coastal Protection Act of

2002 (Proposition 40). Consistent with the purposes of this funding source, the proposed project would be carried out in accordance with the provisions of the Conservancy's enabling legislation and would involve restoration of land and water resources and matching funds are being provided by DPW and the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

Implementation of the proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resource Code Sections 31251-31270. Pursuant to §31251, the Coastal Conservancy may award grants to public agencies to enhance coastal resources, which have suffered loss of natural values because of natural or human-induced events. Consistent with this section, the proposed project would facilitate the design and possible enhancement of wetland resources along the coastal plain portion of the Los Angeles River. The river-associated wetlands that are the objective of the project once existed along the coastal portions of most southern California streams, but virtually all such wetlands have been degraded and lost due to urban development. The proposed design and environmental review may also lead to the enhancement of the natural and scenic character of the area.

Section 31251.2 authorizes Coastal Conservancy participation in projects to enhance a watershed resource that is partly outside of the coastal zone where such action protects or enhances coastal resources within the coastal zone. The types of wetlands that are the subject of the proposed project existed both within and outside the coastal zone under natural conditions. Channelization and encroachment of urban development resulted in almost total obliteration of these river-associated wetlands. In addition, loss of wetlands throughout the Los Angeles River watershed has put more pressure on those small patches of coastal zone wetlands that have been restored or have accreted within the lowest reach of the river. While the project site is outside the very narrow area that is designated as coastal zone at the mouth of the Los Angeles River, it presents a rare opportunity to replace the lost coastal wetland habitat and reduce pressure on existing habitat. Indeed, once constructed, the proposed project would better support species traveling along the Pacific Flyway by increasing aquatic habitat. Demonstration of retention, treatment, and reuse of storm water for irrigation and groundwater recharge may reduce the need for further channelization of waterways in the coastal zone for flood control.

As required by §31252, the proposed project is consistent with the City of Long Beach's Local Coastal Program, as described in the "Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies" section.

Consistent with §31253, the amount of proposed Conservancy funding for this project was determined by the total amount of funding available for coastal resource enhancement projects, the fiscal resources of project participants and the urgency of the project relative to other eligible coastal resource enhancement projects. Matching funds have been committed to the proposed project by DPW and the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy. Without funding from the Coastal Conservancy the level of design may be too limited to support the preparation of an adequate environmental review document.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective A** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project will facilitate the re-creation of coastal habitats in the coastal plain of the Los Angeles River in-

cluding freshwater marsh, riparian areas, and coastal scrub. Also, consistent with **Goal 6, Objectives A and B**, the proposed project would set the stage for construction of wetlands along a two-mile corridor of the Los Angeles River and the improvement of storm runoff and river water for reuse and groundwater infiltration.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** When the wetland feasibility studies for DeForest Nature Center and Dominguez Gap were presented in public meetings, residents of the City of Long Beach passionately expressed support for the opportunity to access natural open space for recreation and education. Support letters are provided in Exhibit 3.
4. **Location:** The proposed project site begins five miles upstream from the mouth of the Los Angeles River. The types of wetlands that are the subject of the proposed project existed both within and outside the coastal zone under natural conditions. Channelization and encroachment of urban development resulted in almost total obliteration of these river-associated wetlands. In addition, loss of wetlands throughout the Los Angeles River watershed has put more pressure on those small patches of coastal zone wetlands that have been restored or have accreted within the lowest reach of the river. While the project site is outside the very narrow area that is designated as coastal zone at the mouth of the Los Angeles River, it presents a rare opportunity to replace the lost coastal wetland habitat and reduce pressure on existing habitat.
5. **Need:** Without Conservancy participation, the design would be limited thereby risking the adequacy of the environmental review and the significant investment by matching funders.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project would prepare the way for construction of wetlands along two miles on the east side of the Los Angeles River. Once achieved, the project site would be an anchor for the City of Long Beach's vision of a continuous open space corridor along the entire 11-mile reach of the Los Angeles River through the city. Not only would the significant increase in aquatic habitat better support species traveling along the Pacific Flyway, but also would build support from urban residents for statewide protection and restoration of coastal resources.

Additional Criteria

8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed multi-purpose project includes re-creation of coastal habitats, open space for passive recreation, environmental education, and water quality improvement and reuse.

9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
11. **Innovation:** The proposed design would incorporate and test guiding principles recommended by *Habitat Value of Wetlands Used to Treat Urban Runoff: A Literature Review*, which was commissioned by the Conservancy on behalf of the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project.
12. **Readiness:** DPW is poised to release a request for proposals and anticipates a contractor starting work in April 2004.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See the “Project History” section above.
15. **Cooperation:** The City of Long Beach and DPW have agreed to jointly direct the proposed project, while DPW provides the administrative support.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The City of Long Beach’s LCP acknowledges the need for “public attention to ensure . . . protection and enhancement” of “sensitive coastal resource areas which are suffering some form of deterioration or development pressure” and “degraded or less than pristine wetlands of any size” (p. I-3). As predicted in the LCP, which was adopted in 1980, a marina near the mouth of the Los Angeles River was converted into inter-tidal wetlands to mitigate the loss of inter-tidal habitat during construction of the downtown harbor (p. III-DS-32). The value of this area, known as Golden Shore, for wildlife will be enhanced with the eventual addition of wetlands in the DeForest/Market and Dominguez Gap basins. Wildlife species often use multiple habitat types during their daily activities (e.g., roosting and foraging) and over their life. A network of aquatic and upland habitats in the vicinity of Golden Shore may increase the attractiveness and usefulness of Golden Shore for wildlife. Also, the risk of Golden Shores being loved to death will be reduced as the public gains access to more wetland habitat such as the proposed project for wildlife viewing, passive recreation, and educational uses.

Golden Shore has been plagued with contaminated silt and trash deposited by the river. In the long-term, the pollutants in urban runoff that adhere to sediment in the river could be reduced if more municipalities incorporate the principles, demonstrated in the proposed project, of retaining storm water and urban runoff for restoration, water treatment, and water reuse.

The LCP identifies bicycle paths as one means to improve access to the downtown shoreline. The bicycle path on the eastern levee of the Los Angeles River passes Golden Shore and connects with a path bordering the ocean. The proposed project would provide a more inviting and safe entry point to the river bike path for residents north of the downtown area. In addition, the number of riders and trips may increase once an aesthetically appealing corridor is created along the river.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15306 in that it involves information collection to prepare a preliminary design and documentation to comply with CEQA. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the proposed authorization.